

ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT: INMATE-TO-INMATE COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

With state and federal budget cuts and tenuous public support for rehabilitation, a volunteer and inmate run rehabilitation program in prison has clear advantages. The author participated in Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops at a medium security prison in Jessup, Maryland in 1994 and subsequently became a facilitator at numerous AVP workshops at a second prison in Jessup. This presentation records impressions from the first two workshops in which the author participated together with subsequent observations regarding the viability of a largely inmate led rehabilitation and community building program in prison. The program stresses experiential learning to promote alternatives to violence. Trust building activities, games, communications exercises, and role play are used to train participants. A goal of the workshops is to counter the predominant prison culture of reserve and distrust. Initially cool and reserved, by the end of the three-day workshop, many participants express enthusiasm and appreciation for the opportunity to get better acquainted and to speak freely about important topics. Evaluation studies show that AVP can make a positive contribution for participants at an individual level and can affect the environment of a prison.

ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT: INMATE-TO-INMATE COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a volunteer run self-help training program begun by inmates in a New York state prison in 1975 with the help of a Quaker volunteer group. Since 1975 AVP has grown and spread, mainly by word of mouth, to prisons and other facilities in 40 states and over 10 countries according to the AVP web site (www.avpusa.org). Over the years, the program has received local news coverage and has been the subject of several articles in the professional literature (see references).

The first AVP workshops I participated in took place in a medium security prison for men in Jessup, Maryland, over two three day periods in July and September of 1994. The 16 to 18 people who participated in the workshops were mainly inmates, mainly male (one outside female volunteer participated) and predominantly African-American. The ratio of facilitators to participants was approximately 1 to 4. The facilitators were inmates trained in AVP with the exception of one outside facilitator at the second workshop. The first workshop was also to have an outside facilitator but at last moment, a family problem prevented her participation. The inmate facilitators included several apprentices who were gaining experience during the workshops.

The setting was a large room, an activities area in the prison. Not air conditioned, it was very hot during the first workshop. Whirring fans made it difficult to hear. About 18 men (the group fluctuated in size slightly from session to session) and one woman sit in a circle on plastic and metal chairs. Hot water, instant coffee, and canned juice were available on a table in the corner. A guard sat at a desk at the door to the room to check people in and out.

IMPRESSIONS FROM THE FIRST WORKSHOP

AVP workshops start with a name game used as an ice breaker. Participants are asked to think of a positive adjective to describe themselves starting with the same letter as their name. For the rest of the workshop this becomes your name as in Excellent Ed or Fabulous Frank. Each person in the circle is expected to introduce everyone to their left using their adjective names before stating their own name.

The last people in the circle need to remember and state everyone's name prior to stating their own name. Often people at the end of the circle need help from others to complete the task. Thereafter participants are asked to preface any remarks to the group by first stating their adjective name.

Early in the workshop, an apprentice facilitator reviewed the ground rules for the workshop which are printed on posters. These are process guidelines such as "We refrain from put-downs of ourselves or others," "Do not speak too often or too long," "Volunteer yourself only, don't volunteer others," and "Everyone has the right to pass."

AVP stresses experiential learning and downplays lectures. Some goals of the workshop, such as building trust, are pursued indirectly or non-verbally through tasks that require cooperation, through games, and through "lite and lively" sessions. The purpose of these exercises appears to be to break down prison definitions of toughness or self-sufficiency. One game is "Big Wind Blows," a variation on musical chairs. Another game involves two person teams who move about with locked arms. Other light sessions involve tossing multiple fuzzy balls across and around the circle in a given sequence.

While I felt stiff and uncomfortable at first, I soon loosened up. I noticed that most participants were laughing or smiling at the end of the lite and lively sessions.

Lighter sessions are interspersed with more serious sessions. Typically participants break into small groups and take turns talking to one another about questions such as: "What about myself am I most proud?" "Who is someone I admire and why?" "What goals for myself do I have for the next 5 years?" After the small group sessions, participants sit in the larger circle and the facilitator asks for feedback on the exercise.

In another session, participants talk about values turned upside down in prison. Prison values include avoiding weakness--to not be a chump. People take advantage. You're either predator or prey. A tough moral dilemma raised in this session is what does a person do when violence occurs? Stand on the sidelines, turn away, or get involved? There can be a heavy cost to getting involved.

The facilitator stresses that AVP does not have answers to difficult questions. Instead each of us needs to look within ourselves for answers. However, preparation and exercises can increase the chance that we will be able to deal with difficult situations in creative and more humane way.

Another facilitator reviews a 12 point guide to "transforming power" in dealing with other people. The principles are printed on posters placed around the room and include guidelines such as "find something you have in common" "base your position on truth" "use surprise and humor" and "be patient and persistent" among others. The facilitator again stresses there are no magic answers for dealing with violence but that if we are prepared and use our intelligence, there are alternatives to fight or flight.

The first workshop ends on an up note with affirmation posters and a graduation ceremony. Affirmation posters are large sheets of paper with people's names written on it in fancy letters taped to the walls around the perimeter of the room. Walking from poster to poster, participants have a chance to write something positive about the person on the posters. At the graduation ceremony, a statement from a person's poster is read, the participant gets a certificate of participation, and goes around the circle giving high fives accompanied by applause from the group.

SECOND WORKSHOP IMPRESSIONS

I recognize some participants and facilitators from the first workshop but others are new to me. The second workshop opens with a name game plus a pantomime of who I am or an activity I like. Each person needs to name all others to their left in the circle and act out their pantomime. Others help when a person can't remember. There is kidding around about people near the end of the circle who

have so many names and pantomimes to remember. People tend to unfreeze with the attention they receive when others look at them and try to remember their name and pantomime.

Participants in the second workshop are asked to vote on a theme or problem to address during the remainder of the workshop. A facilitator writes suggested topics on a flip chart and discussion ensues. The choice is narrowed down to two topics: "troubled youth" and "problems in communication."

Some participants lean forward in their chairs looking at other speakers while waiting for their turn to speak on behalf of one or another of these topics. In the end a merged topic--problems in communication between youth and older generation--was chosen.

A recurring theme in several sessions is the gap between generations and the difficulty of older men (late 30's and 40's) in influencing or reaching the younger generation. The latter is portrayed as being wild, unpredictable, and headed for the morgue or jail. Sample comments include: "How do you convince a youth not to sell drugs?" "Need to offer options." "Can't stop youth from wanting nice things." "Telling someone is not good enough. I didn't listen when I was coming up--why should they?"

In one exercise we break into small groups. Our task is to write a problem we have on a piece of paper, fold up the paper and place it on the floor in the center of the small group. Next we pick up a piece of paper off the floor (not our own) and play the role of person seeking feedback from the small group on how to handle the problem. The paper I picked from the floor read:

"I'm very attached to money but the only way I know how to get it is from negative doings because I never had a job or proper attention as a child." When my turn came I stated this problem to the group. I received some advice about job-hunting. I countered with my not being able to live on a minimum-wage job. One participant answered my complaint about low wages with the phrase, "it's slow go or no go."

The second day I notice more smiles. Before a session gets started, participants grin before starting a conversation with me from across the circle. In a morning session, a respected facilitator, a leader in AVP at the prison, tells about lessons he learned the hard way. He says a person needs to risk losing friends and not give in to peer pressure. Something positive like friendship or loyalty can be negative depending on the situation. "It's hard to lose a friend (for not going along with him) but not as hard as doing 25 years." Trust is good but be careful who you trust because your friend can bring you down. "Life is short in the fast lane."

Facilitators make a pitch for young participants to help with a youth outreach program. Three young men in the circle get special attention as it is thought they can bridge the generation gap better than older AVP-ers.

Skits or role-playing highlight the second workshop. The group is split into three groups, each with a facilitator coach, and given time to devise a skit, assign roles, and rehearse prior to presenting a skit on the theme of alternatives to violence to the larger group. In one skit, a man is let out of prison and returns to find his girl friend living with another man. A violent confrontation is avoided (thanks to AVP training) by the ex-inmate in an angry doorstep conversation between the two men. In my group's skit, kids are locked out of a Korean grocery after an incident with the store keeper the previous day. Now they are asked by mom to go to store to get bread and milk. They don't want to tell mom what happened. The conflict between the boys and the storekeeper is mediated by a third party.

Affirmation posters and a graduation ceremony end the second workshop. People are interested in seeing what other people wrote on their posters. It is a chance to say something positive about someone in a safe manner.

Facilitators ask for positive and negative feedback on the workshop. As a guest, I find it difficult to give negative feedback as I fear I would seem too critical. In my mind I note that I was sometimes bored waiting for the facilitators to caucus prior to going on with the next exercise. I also recalled my upset with an inexperienced facilitator in my small group who tried to assign roles and direct the skit

instead of acting as a resource and letting us participants do it.

CONCLUSIONS

I was impressed with the skills of the facilitators in moving the workshop from session to session, directing the small group exercises, and in soliciting feedback from participants. Inmates expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak in candid ways to each other about important topics. Most evaluation comments at the end of the workshops were positive.

I was also impressed with seriousness and candor of the participants. I asked one participant if the men in the workshop were representative of the inmate population or a selected group. I explained that many of the men I spoke with said there were involved in an education or other self-help program. He answered that AVP workshops are open to all inmates but that men are not likely to sign up for a workshop until they start to develop a positive attitude. He said many young inmates serving long sentences are not interested in education or other programs. He said that he was not interested until about 5 years had passed of the 14 years he had served. A facilitator later told me he had observed the same tendency--that for some young inmates, a change in point of view happens after about 5 years.

AVP was well established at this prison. It trained numerous facilitators and offered workshops at frequent intervals. By one estimate about 300 men had participated in at least one workshop over the last several years of whom approximately 150 were /still in the facility. This was about 10% of the inmate population. Some of the men believe AVP had a positive impact on the atmosphere of the prison.

In the workshop sessions I was surprised by the focus on individual or personal change as opposed to railing against the "system." The workshops did NOT turn into general bitch sessions. I noticed very little "mau-mauing." For example, when a facilitator asked for examples of violence during a brainstorming session, one participant said "the judge sending me here." A facilitator disagreed but added that injustice or a miscarriage of justice could be an example of violence.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The positive messages of individual responsibility, growth, and behavioral change encountered in these AVP workshops are similar to those which, hopefully, would be the result of a professionally run rehabilitation program. In that sense, they make a positive contribution. In fact, the workshops may be more successful than professionally run groups by virtue of the fact that messages are coming from inmates or volunteers rather than paid professionals identified with the prison administration.

In this time of budget cutbacks and tenuous public support for rehabilitation, a largely inmate run rehabilitation program has obvious appeal. In this prison, the program required a considerable outside volunteer effort in the beginning during the late 1980's. It took several years to get off the ground. Eventually the administration was won over regarding the value of the program.

Administration support is necessary for the program to succeed. Support includes allocating space for the workshops, a small budget for incidental expenses, and staff to check the inmates and volunteers in and out of the workshop area. If corrections policy makers or managers want to expand AVP programs, the dependence of the program on volunteers may be a weak point. It is not easy to find outside volunteers willing to give up 3-day weekends to participate or facilitate AVP workshops. Inmate facilitators are a great asset in this case. It remains an open question whether the program can be implemented with paid staff or through official channels. The experience of other inmate self-help programs at other prisons would be helpful on this point.

AVP places a heavy emphasis on training. Three workshops are offered: basic, advanced, and training for trainers. Manuals from AVP/USA are available and are periodically updated. The manuals contain much information on how to conduct workshops including sample agendas, group exercises, and games. If there is no other benefit, some inmates who become AVP facilitators learn marketable skills--how to communicate better and how to facilitate groups. These skills are transferable to human service occupations after release from prison.

AVP programs have been evaluated by a number of researchers. Delahanty provides an excellent

summary of the results of AVP evaluations to date. The evaluations generally focus on the self-reported impact of the participants as a result of the workshops. The evaluations showed usually positive responses on the part of workshop participants. It is more difficult to gauge the impact of the program upon the institution in which the workshops are held. Miller and Shuford (2005) quote officials in two prisons who report improvements in inmate behavior and in the general level of violence in the institution. Sloan (2002) looked at inmate behavioral write-ups before and after participation in AVP using an experimental and a control group. He found that the experimental group experienced a 60% drop in write-ups compared to the control group. Miller and Shuford (2005) undertook an ambitious three-year post-release study of recidivism of AVP participants and non-participants using the Delaware Criminal Justice Information System. In their study AVP participants had a substantially lower rate of recidivism and return to prison.

AVP is a worthwhile program that has much to commend it. It is based on sound psychological and group process principles which have evolved over the years. For outside volunteers, the program builds bridges and reduces the psychological distance between "us" and "them." For inmates the program offers leadership training, constructive values and has the potential to contribute to a more positive atmosphere in prison. For inmates who return to the community, the program provides tools for dealing with people and conflict in the wider world and, hopefully, a better prospect for not returning to the criminal justice system.

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